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In war for weapons, Iraq reportedly winning

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WASHINGTON — The war between Iran and Iraq has been bogged down by winter weather and has become largely an indecisive artillery duel. But in the competition for resupply of the implements of war — tanks, planes and ammunition — Iraq is winning hands down, according to US sources.

The result may be that, unless a negotiated settlement is found in the next few months, Iraq will be in a commanding position to launch a major offensive come spring.

The Soviet Union which, to show its disapproval of the Iraqi attack last September, cut off all arms shipments to Baghdad, appears to be trying to make amends by allowing its Eastern European satellites to become important proxy arms merchants.

For example, Poland recently shipped more than 100 Soviet-style T55 tanks of its own manufacture to Saudi Arabia, where they were picked up by Iraqi tank-transporters and moved to Iraq, the US sources said.

In addition to the Soviet-bloc shipments, France is beginning delivery to Iraq of Mirage F1 jet fighters ordered well before the war, and it has been signing and starting delivery on new orders of sophisticated antitank and antiaircraft missiles, they added.

At first it appeared that with Iraqi ports under air attack from Iran, Jordan's port of Aqaba would become the principal entry point for military as well as commercial goods destined for Baghdad. King Hussein announced he would do anything he could to help Iraq in its war.

But Aqaba has become choked primarily with nonmilitary cargoes for Iraq, analysts say. They add that the major entry points for military hardware have been Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which until recently have used the cover of night and commercial tractor-trailers to try to mask their pro-Iraqi activity.

American sources say that over the last two months, however, both the Saudis and the Kuwaitis have become more open in assisting their Arab neighbor. Presumably, they feel that the presence of US AWACS (early-warning aircraft) and two US aircraft carriers in the vicinity

are sufficient to deter Iran from wreaking military retribution on them.

Earlier this week Iran charged that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates signed a secret pact shortly before the war to finance Iraq's military campaign.

Western intelligence sources say that four Soviet ships loaded with arms for Iraq when the war began were diverted to Aden, in South Yemen, where they anchored for a few months awaiting a decision on whether to proceed. But then they pulled anchor and went back to their home ports in the Black Sea, via the Suez Canal.

Iraqi officials have bitterly attacked the Soviets for not fulfilling weapons commitments.

While North Korea, Libya and Syria—all Soviet client states — have flown small amounts of Soviet-manufactured weapons and ammunition to Iran, Moscow itself has not.

US analysts say Kremlin policy-makers are in a bind: They would prefer to be seen as even-handed in the war, both to try to repair relations with Baghdad later and to be in a position to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise in the fluid revolutionary situation in Iran.

It was the fear that a hostage deal with Washington would lead to a resumption of a significant US role in Iran that is believed to have spurred an 11th hour Soviet attempt to undermine the negotiations. Soviet press reports during a critical stage in the talks charged the negotiations were merely a smokescreen behind which the United States was planning a military attack on Iran.

Intelligence sources say that, while both nations are busily scouring the world for arms and spare parts, Iraq has been very successful, while Iran is getting only a trickle of materiel, mostly acquired through high-priced middlemen, not from governments.

Besides Poland, other Eastern European sources for Iraq are said to include East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Since the bulk of Iraqi weapons is of Soviet design, spare parts and ammunition from such sources are important.

Sources say the Iraqis are even sending out feelers on whether Egypt might be willing to provide Baghdad with Soviet-style ammunition, tank parts and radar, which Cairo manufactures for its own use.

Sources report the Iraqis have had problems employing some of their most advanced Soviet weapons. For example, the Soviet T62 tank has an unusually long gun barrel. Iraqi tank commanders have left the muzzles level when

traversing ditches in Khuzestan. The result is that the barrels filled with dirt and blew up when fired. The T62s reportedly have been withdrawn from combat.

Intelligence analysts say that, in an effort to immobilize Iraqi tanks, the Iranians lately have been flooding parts of the occupied border area by opening dams. One trouble is that Dez dam at Dez generates hydroelectric power, and the opening of the sluice gates is said to be reducing power generation.

Analysts say Iranian leaders are in a Catch 22 situation on the question of seeking a peace settlement. President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr has accused the country's hard-line clerics of having settled for too little in their hostage deal with the United States. Bani-Sadr is in charge of the war effort. Should a peace with traditional enemy Iraq essentially accept Baghdad's terms, Bani-Sadr could expect to lose out in the power struggle with the Islamic clerics.

But, if the clerics should take the initiative on making peace, they could be accused of selling out twice — to Washington and to Baghdad.

"It's in nobody's interest to see that war continue," comments one US analyst. "But nobody can figure out a way to end it and save everyone's face."